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SAMUEL BUTLER AND EDUCATION

SINCE his death in 1902, Butler has come more and more to be recognized not merely as the author of amusing and caustic satire, but as a profound and original thinker on Psychology and Evolution. Whether his "discoveries" of Gandenzio Ferrari and Tabachetti, of the authorship of the *Odyssey* (in propounding which heresy his plausibility rivals Mrs. Gallup's), and his elucidation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, are, or ever will be, accepted by orthodox authorities, I cannot say; but on the subject of Education—though he omits it from the last of his seventeen most interesting "finds"—Butler left many scattered remarks, which together form a thing that deserves and indeed requires serious consideration. Yet I can recall no reference to Butler in any book on Education except that by Professor Nunn)¹ and even there it is Butler's biological theory of "Invention" rather than any of his views on Education, that is quoted. Such neglect is not surprising, for Butler was always a "literary pariah"; nor were his remarks on Education likely to conciliate dons or schoolmasters. Yet Butler had the pedagogue in his blood. His grandfather during his head-mastership of Shrewsbury (1798-1835) proved himself one of the most revolutionary of nineteenth century schoolmasters;² and Butler made ample amends for his portrait as George Pontifex by editing *The Life and Letters of Dr. Samuel Butler* (1896), "insofar as they illustrate the scholastic, religious and social life of England from 1790-1840." Brought up at Shrewsbury under his grandfather's successor Benjamin Hall Kennedy (the notorious Dr. Skinner of *The Way of All Flesh*), Butler not only acquired the "class spirit" of the English public schoolboy,³ but enough classics to ensure his doing well at

¹ *Education: Its Date and First Principles*, by Prof. T. P. Nunn: Chap. 11.

² See Adamson's *Short History of Education*.

³ See J. B. Yeats, "Recollections of Samuel Butler," in *Essays, Irish and American*.

Cambridge; for it should never be forgotten, in reading his strictures on academism, that Butler was bracketed twelfth in the first part of the Classical Tripods—thus doing better at the university than many a man whose only distinction in life has been a good degree. He had really tasted of the grapes before he declared them sour.

The word “academicism” includes the bulk of what Butler attacked in educational aims and practice. It signified for him not merely that remoteness from life with which academies of one kind or another are usually charged, but also those faults in their training which have been exposed in recent years by experimental psychology. Thus, to give but two instances, Butler foresaw the downfall of “mental gymnastic” from its bad eminence, and he emphasized the value of “learning by doing,” rather than by attending to rules and theories. In the well-known account of the Colleges of Unreason in Crewhon, he satirizes under the name of “Hypothetics,” the curriculum and methods of English Public Schools and Universities. The Professors of these Colleges, he writes, “argue thus—that to teach a boy merely the nature of things which exist in the world around him, and about which he will have to be conversant during his whole life, would be giving him but a narrow and shallow conception of the universe, which it is urged might contain all manner of things which are not now to be found therein. To open his eyes to these possibilities and so to prepare him for all sorts of emergencies, is the object of this system of hypothetics. To imagine a set of utterly strange and impossible contingencies and require the youths to give intelligent answers to the questions that arise therefrom, is reckoned the fittest conceivable way of preparing them for the actual conduct of their affairs in after life. Thus they are taught what is called the hypothetical language for many of their best years—a language which was originally composed at a time when the country was in a very different state of civilization to what it is at present, a state which has long since disappeared and been superseded. Many valuable maxims and noble thoughts which were at one time concealed in it have become current in this modern literature and have been translated over and over again into the language now spoken. Surely then it would seem enough that the study of the original language should be confined to the few whose instincts led them naturally to pursue it. But the Crewhonians think differently; the store they set by this hypothetical language can

hardly be believed; they will even give anyone a maintenance for life if he attains a considerable proficiency in the study of it; nay, they will spend years in learning to translate some of their own good poetry into the hypothetical language—to do so with fluency being reckoned a distinguishing mark of a scholar and gentleman.”⁴ This attack upon the Classical education had doubtless more pungency in 1872 than it has now. But the satire of the first sentences quoted—that directed against hypothetical studies—is, as already stated, no stray shot, but one instance of Butler’s oft-repeated censure of “Academicism.” “The more I see of academicism the more I distrust it,” he writes in the *Note-books*.⁵ “If I had approached painting as I have approached bookwriting and music, that is to say by beginning at once to do what I wanted, or as near as I could to what I could find out of this, and taking pains not by way of solving academic difficulties, in order to provide against practical ones, but by waiting till a difficulty arose in practice and then tackling it, thus making the arising of each difficulty be the occasion for learning what had to be learnt about it—if I had approached painting in this way I should have been all right. As it is I have been all wrong, and it was South Kensington and Heatherley’s that set me wrong. I listened to the nonsense about how I ought to study before beginning to paint, and about never painting without nature, and the result was that I learned to study but not to paint. . . . Fortunately for me, there are no academies for teaching people how to write books, or I should have fallen into them as I did into those for painting and, instead of writing, should have spent my time and money in being told that I was learning how to write. If I had one thing to say to students before I died . . . I should say: “Don’t learn to do, but learn in doing. Let your falls not be on a prepared ground, but let them be bona fide falls in the rough and tumble of the world; only, of course, let them be on a small scale in the first instance till you feel your feet under you. Act more and rehearse less.” So he “regards dumb-bells with suspicion as academic,”⁶ thus forestalling modern theories of physical training (and even the change that has come upon army “physical jerks”), and their avoidance of the old formal gymnastic. The excellent cooking at Oxford

⁴ Crewdon, chapter XXI. (Fifield, London; E. P. Dutton and Co., New York). For permission to use this and other passages from the work of Samuel Butler, I am indebted to the courtesy of Mr. A. C. Fifield.

⁵ *The Note-books of Samuel Butler*, p. 104. (Fifield, London; E. P. Dutton & Co., New York).

⁶ *Ib.*, p. 219.

and Cambridge, which is better than the curriculum, "is taught by apprenticeship in the kitchens: there is no Chair of Cookery,"⁷ whilst it would be as reasonable to "have a professor of wit as of poetry."⁸

In all these passages (and many more might be quoted) we find a consistent and surely a very sound doctrine as to the acquisition of any form of skill, and perhaps any form of knowledge. Our pupils should learn in the same way as an apprentice learns, i. e., by actual performance, by getting on with the job, not thinking over-much about rules, or about possible but remote contingencies. This difference between apprenticeship and academicism is clearly illustrated in a most suggestive chapter ("Considerations on the Decline of Italian Art") in *Alps and Sanctuaries*. Speaking of the rapidity with which his friend Mr. Festing Jones learned to draw, Butler asks, "How did he learn? On the old principle, if I am not mistaken. The old principle was for a man to be doing something which he was pretty strongly bent on doing, and to get a much younger one to help him. The younger paid nothing for instruction, but the elder took the work, as long as the relation of master and pupil existed between them. I, then, was making illustrations for this book, and got Jones to help me. I let him see what I was doing, and derive an idea of the sort of thing I wanted and then left him alone—beyond giving him the same kind of small criticism that I expected from himself—but I appropriated his work. That is the way to teach, and the result was that in an incredibly short time Jones could draw. The taking the work is a *sine qua non*. If I had not been going to have his work, Jones, in spite of all his quickness, would probably have been rather slower in learning to draw. Being paid in money nothing like so good. This is the system of apprenticeship *versus* the academic system. The academic system consists in letting them do it, with just a trifle of supervision. 'For all a rhetorician's rules,' says my great namesake, 'teach nothing, but to name his tools'; and academic rules generally are much the same as the rhetorician's. Some men can pass through acad-

⁷ *Ib.*, p. 222.

⁸ *Ib.*, p. 221.

emies unscathed, but they are very few, and in the main the academic influence is a baleful one, whether exerted in a university or a school. While young men at universities are being prepared for their entry into life, their rivals have already entered it. The most university and examination ridden people in the world are the Chinese, and they are the least progressive."⁹

It should be added that Butler, with his usual sanity, remarks that "this proposition, like every other, wants tempering with a slight infusion of its direct opposite"; as again he says. "It is with this as with everything else—there must be a harmonious fusing of two principles which are in flat contradiction to one another." Still he held generally that knowledge must be acquired as and when it is wanted and wanted so badly as to cause discomfort. "There are plenty of things that most boys would give their ears to know, these and these only are the proper thing for them to sharpen their wits upon. If a boy is idle and does not want to learn anything at all, the same principle should guide those who have the care of him—he should never be made to learn anything till it is pretty obvious that he cannot get on without it. This will save trouble to boys and teachers, moreover it will be far more likely to increase a boy's desire to learn. I know in my own case no earthly power could make me learn till I had my head given me; and nothing has been able to stop me from incessant study from that day to this."¹⁰ Now that the theory of "mental gymnastic" is discredited, and psychologists have proved that there is little or no transference of one form of training to another, we may well believe that Butler's advice for the treatment of the lazy boy indicates not merely the line of least resistance, but the policy that will in the end prove most fruitful.

For his views on the larger question of the apprenticeship system there is much to be said. We had in England during the war

⁹ *Alps and Sanctuaries of Piedmont and the Canton Ticino*, chap. XII. (Fifield, London.)

¹⁰ *Note-books*, p. 103. The substance of this note is embodied in the marvellous speech of the "Dinner Guest" (*The Way of All Flesh*, chap. XXXI). Cf. the remark of Butler's disciple, Bernard Shaw: "If the child finds that it can no more go to the seaside without a knowledge of the multiplication and pence tables, than it can be an astronomer without mathematics, it will learn more than it always does at present, in spite of all the canings and keepings in." (*Parents and Children*, p. lxxvii.)

an extraordinary example of its success in the training of soldiers, particularly of officers; for no one will deny the efficiency of the average temporary officer: to compare him with the finest type of regular is naturally unfair. This astonishing piece of education was achieved, for the most part, without anything which approached academicism; and when the army did try to be academic, the process was not merely retarded—it ended in laughter. It may be urged that such rough and ready teaching is only emergency measure; yet the proof of the pudding is in the eating: this kind of training produced what was required. The men were keen on learning, and they learnt by actual performance—in many cases their falls being on ground by no means prepared. In the training for more peaceful professions many traces of apprenticeship remain. The lawyer still takes articled clerks, who learn their business in the daily routine of the office. Even in a highly specialized science like medicine, the most useful part of the course is that spent in the hospitals; though one may be permitted the inconsistency of rejoicing that medical apprentices are forbidden to practice. The best engineer has usually been through the shops, and has probably served his time there; whilst captains of industry, I am told, look with little favor on the latest outgrowth of academicism, a university course in commerce. In the training for another profession, that of teaching, the demonstration school is an essential part of the Education Department. But it would clearly be a vast improvement if it were economically possible for students in training to serve a year's apprenticeship in school before entering upon his professional training. As things are, the student is still permitted to attach the theory before he has had a chance of learning its significance in practice. The sterility of many education courses results from the theory being taught to young graduates who can have no conception of the problems involved or of the "hypothetical difficulties" to which his attention is directed.

Butler has thus put his finger on the growing pains in educational theory. The recognition of auto-education is indeed a discovery of the obvious. Its success in Adult Education in England has

given rise to a movement of far reaching importance. One may predict that only on such lines can the continued education of "young persons" hope to prosper. Educationists may do worse than study the works of Sam Butler, where they will find certain fundamental truths stated with a vigor and humor which they do not always receive from professional exponents of Pedagogy.

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